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BOYS AND LITERATURE

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Given: One Hundred Boys and American Literature

Problem: To connect the two with the greatest economy of time and yet teach literary discrimination, with a constant and increased stimulation of the student's natural curiosity and interest in literature and all closely allied fields

This is the problem that confronts every teacher of literature. The question of time in a survey course is a great factor and limits the number and selection of authors one can discuss. The natural tendency is to select and follow rather closely a good textbook, supplementing the biographical and critical material with some carefully chosen book of selected readings. But does this appeal to the boy? Does the textbook method arouse literary discrimination and stimulate the curiosity of the youngster so that the good books of the library have to be replaced? In one case, at least, after the first three months this method began to pall, and a spirit of resignation replaced the naturally wide-awake interest of the boy. Why? The human elements that appeal to the boy were lacking.

There is the first flaw in the textbook method for high school boys. The biographical material is of necessity limited, and naturally the author selects the outstanding incidents of the public life of the writer who is under discussion. These incidents, as all know, are more or less artificial, so that a similarity results, which, to the adventure-dreaming boy, soon becomes a procession of "born-married-wrote-died."

As a solution, after some discussion with the more serious members of the class, this idea was hit upon. Each boy chose from a posted list of about forty authors one writer in whom he thought he would be especially interested, most of the unfamiliar

writers having been briefly summarized by the teacher. If any author of value with whom the boy was acquainted was not included, the student could, on approval, add that name to the list. This record was then arranged chronologically, stating the name of the author, the name of the student, and the date of the lecture—the amount of time, from one to four days, being in accordance with the relative importance of the author.

Each boy, then, was to be prepared to speak for at least one period upon the writer he had chosen. This meant that each boy had to formulate one lecture for oral composition and literature. The rest of the time was given to reading. All those in the audience took notes, and every two weeks these notebooks were collected, marked, returned, and criticized. This gives the student valuable experience in discrimination that may prevent a catastrophe during the Freshman year in college when so much information must be assimilated by means of the lecture method. Little unexpected quizzes and bi-monthly examinations were given.

What has been gained by this method? The boy has something he has himself chosen. He is speaking to an audience, and, as he is limited to one lecture, he must do his best—his competitive best. This means that he will carefully prepare to tell the interesting things about “his” writer, because he will wish his classmates to enjoy what he has enjoyed. Consequently he chooses to tell the things in which he was interested while reading his book of biography. In other words, the boy instinctively chooses the human element and thus unconsciously develops interest and, by various inadvertent references, stimulates the curiosity of his listeners.

This, however, is but a third of the advantage gained. Notice what has been gained both in knowledge and in time. Instead of having a somewhat formal, limited fund of biographical material, all the students have a real background of literary information, have had experience in arranging a large piece of composition work that required thoughtful organization, and yet, in the same amount of time, have opportunity left for reading.

Surprise often awaits the teacher when a heretofore mediocre student suddenly becomes alive and shows a vital interest that leads him beyond the single book of biography in the search for

interesting material in regard to "his" author. This, in more than one case, has led to a real gain in library information and in one instance to a bit of real research work. There is no adequate biography of Joaquin Miller on which to base a lecture of an hour, so the student searched through several books and then turned to the magazines and gathered much interesting material from biographical and critical articles published at the time of Miller's death. Thus was gained in certain instances rare experience with difficult problems in composition.

Reading is the answer to the words of the problem, "constant and increased stimulation of the student's natural curiosity and interest." First, choose such works of the author as bear upon the dramatic incidents emphasized by the lecturer. For instance, when dealing with Longfellow, read the little poem telling you of young Henry Wadsworth, an uncle who was killed at Tripoli; or watch the tense avidity with which they drink in "The Cross of Snow" when it is closely linked with one of the tragedies of his life. Second, when more material seems necessary, put yourself in the boy's place and choose what would appeal to him. With this method there is wide choice, for, since most of the reading is done in class, a book for each person is unnecessary, the student merely jotting in his notebook what is necessary in order to recall the work. Consequently the choice is limited only by the library facilities. There is also one other great advantage. There is little required reading. "An advantage?" one might ask. Yes, for too often required reading is perfunctory. Where is the advantage then? An interesting story, play, or poem is read in class, and the teacher names—incidentally, of course—certain other works of the same author which are just as interesting. If the work has been well done the pens will start scratching, and the books in the library are at a premium.

What authors and what works were studied? Those of which every student of American literature should know something, and any others whose lives *or* works would prove interesting to boys. The selection largely depends upon the type of pupil. In the list below, the work for a period of three months, all types will be found, varying from Hawthorne to O. Henry, from Lowell to

London; some men, such as Miller, whose lives are more interesting than much of their work; others, like Tarkington, whose works are more interesting than their lives. In every case there is something either to satisfy the boy's love of action and adventure or to appeal deeply to his sympathy.

For instance, in dealing with Longfellow the lecturer himself spoke of the poems "My Lost Youth," "Footsteps of Angels," and "The Cross of Snow"; therefore, while the spell was still there, these poems were read. In addition, one of the pupils told the story of "Evangeline," and then the more dramatic portions were read in class, together with "King Robert of Sicily" and some of the interesting minor poems. (The class had read "Hiawatha" in the lower forms.) Here the selection is of the usual sort and the treatment of the customary type. The approach to Lowell would, perhaps, be a little more characteristic. "The Courtin'" with some of the other "Bigelow Papers," was read, and the "Commemoration Ode" was touched upon. The latter was neither read completely in class nor analyzed. The teacher gave a brief outline, including the central thought of each stanza and that of the whole poem. Then, with the story of its inspirational composition in mind, four stanzas were read—clearly, sympathetically—with the result that the boys did not think of it as a "dry" poem, but as a virile memorial monument, built of patriotic ideals, upholding the masterful, rough-hewn dignity of Lincoln.

Is not this the secret of developing the reading habit: To drop a series of attractive literary morsels which leads the pupil to the storehouse with a whetted appetite, rather than arbitrarily to stuff him so that he arrives with a spirit of satiated indifference?

The weakness of this method is obvious. The student lectures are not equally well done, but in only five cases out of the hundred was it necessary for the teacher to supplement the lecture to such an extent that it was practically a repetition. Even here the class was conscious of but one complete failure, for, by careful direction of discussion and of questions, the teacher can develop any phase of the author which has been omitted or which needs emphasis.

There are several interesting phases still undergoing experimentation or entirely undeveloped, which link this idea closely

with allied fields in composition. Already certain boys are showing real interest in versification; in the development of a characteristic style, using as a basis the manner of composition of some literary demigod such as Richard Harding Davis; in the story of local color or character such as is developed by Cable, Page, or Harte.

What should be the aim of a literature course? A minimum essential of literary knowledge, or the stimulation of a larger desire for creative knowledge? The method here described develops the desire by which, it would seem, the reading habit is cultivated and original creative work is stimulated.

LIST OF AUTHORS PRESENTED FROM MARCH 1 TO MAY 15 WITH THE
WORK MOST CAREFULLY STUDIED

- Longfellow, "King Robert of Sicily"
 Whittier, "Skipper Ireson's Ride," "Ichabod," "The Lost Occasion"
 Emerson, "Terminus," excerpts from "Self-Reliance"
 Lowell, "Commemoration Ode," *Biglow Papers*
 Holmes, "Deacon's Masterpiece," "Chambered Nautilus," parts of
Autocrat
 Lanier, "Marshes of Glynn"
 Timrod and Hayne, war poems
 Taylor, Eastern poems
 Miller, "Columbus"
 Hawthorne, "Lady Eleanor's Mantle," "Gray Champion"
 Harte, "Outcasts of Poker Flat," "Heathen Chinese," "Jim," "Two Men
 of Sandy Bar"
 Thoreau, description of the "Fight of the Ants"
 Prescott, excerpts from *Conquest of Mexico*
 Parkman, excerpts from *The Jesuits in North America*
 Aldrich, *Mercedes*
 Howells, *The Mouse-Trap*
 Twain, after-dinner speech on "Babies," "How the McWilliamses Had
 Membraneous Croup"
 Harris, play songs and Uncle Remus stories
 Cable, "Posson Jone"
 Page, "Marse Chan"
 Davis, "Gallegher" and some of the Van Bibber stories
 Riley, a number of his short dialect boy monologues
 London, discussion, as all had read a number of his stories
 Henry, two of *Voices of the City*
 Roosevelt, *Letters to His Children*
 Tarkington, *Monsieur Beaucaire*